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SUBJECT: The 2007 Philippine Senate Race

11. (SBU) Summary and comment: The nationwide May 14 elections for all members of the lower house of Congress and for virtually all governors and local officials also include the races for twelve seats in the 24-member Senate. Predictions vary widely, with the Administration boasting it will win all twelve seats, the Opposition making similar claims, and many observers expecting a 50/50 split. The Senate has faced much criticism over its perceived failure to pass legislation, especially many in the once-pro-Administration Senate withdrew their full support from President Arroyo following the July 2005 political turmoil. Control of the Senate would be imperative to the President if ever the lower house passed an impeachment motion, as it failed to do in 2005 and 2006. The campaign will be lively but the result is most likely to be a mixed bag. End Summary and comment.

The games begin

12. (U) Campaigning has begun in the May 14 nationwide elections, which includes half of the current Senate, or twelve seats. Six incumbents are seeking a second and final six-year term, while six former Senators seek comebacks, including one putschist facing coup charges anew. There are five relatively young term-limited Congressmen who aspire to the Upper House. A Representative-turned-Cabinet Secretary is also campaigning, while two provincial governors are banking on name recall to shift to a national legislative office. Several are braving the national campaign trail for the first time: a Philippine bar topnotcher -- whose father is currently a Senator; two movie actors; a junior military officer also facing coup charges; a Muslim sultan; and, the widow of a 2004 presidential candidate.

13. (U) Frontrunners, among a total of 37 official candidates, have joined two major coalition slates, which are a confusing mix of critics and cronies of President Arroyo and ousted President Joseph "Erap" Estrada (still on trial for plunder): the pro-Administration "TEAM Unity" and the pro-Estrada "Genuine Opposition." Given the need to campaign for votes nationwide - a peculiarity of the Philippine system - the races will be expensive. Few observers expect the most prominent candidates to stay anywhere within the prescribed limits on spending per voter. The campaign season has already been deadly, with murders so far of at least two candidates on the local level, but none yet on the national level.

TEAM Unity

14. (U) The pro-Arroyo TEAM (Together Everyone Achieves More) Unity (TU) has not performed especially well in early poll surveys, leading observers initially to conclude that the Administration had virtually surrendered the Senate to the opposition, while

concentrating instead on keeping a sufficient majority in the lower House again to block expected new impeachment motions. At an April 2 national meeting of the dominant Lakas CMD party -- titularly headed by President Arroyo, along with former President Ramos and House Speaker De Venecia -- pro-Administration forces nonetheless boasted that they might win all twelve Senate seats.

¶5. (U) TEAM Unity has the strong advantage of a well oiled and funded party machinery organized from the national down to the local level. Lakas has maintained its strategic alliances with other major parties, including Kabalikat ng Malayang Pilipino (KAMPI) or "Partner of the Free Filipino" (founded by President Arroyo), the Liberal Party-Atienza wing, the Nationalist People's Coalition (NPC), and Laban ng Demokratikong Pilipino (LDP) or "Fight of the Democratic Filipino." Also, the team has a strong field network, controlling a majority of local government seats.

¶6. (U) To its further advantage, TU launched its nationwide campaign amid the highest business confidence in the country since 2001, as reported by the Central Bank. TEAM Unity Spokesman Ace Durano, concurrently Tourism Secretary, claimed that even American investors have given their "vote of confidence" in the Administration by pledging at least US\$3 billion in investments this year as a result of improved fiscal climate and business optimism in the country.

¶7. (SBU) Individual candidates on TEAM Unity include:

- Edgardo "Ed" Angara, incumbent Senator, LDP. Age 72, born September 4, 1934 in Quezon Province. Although head of the opposition party LDP, Angara has pursued a policy of critical collaboration with the Arroyo Administration and in 2005 even contemplated joining the Cabinet. He is among the few in the Senate who supports "charter change" (Constitutional revision) via

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convening Congress as a constituent assembly. He voted in favor of maintaining U.S. bases, the Anti-Money Laundering Act, and the 2007 Human Security Act. A champion of education, senior citizen welfare, and agricultural modernization, Angara ranked ninth in the 2001 senatorial race. His current survey ratings place him in the same vicinity so far;

- Joker Arroyo, incumbent Senator, KAMPI. Age 79, born January 5, 1928 in Naga City, Camarines Sur. The well-known human rights and anti-corruption advocate ranked fifth in the 2001 Senate race under the pro-Administration coalition slate. He served as a Congressman from Makati City 1992- 2001, and was the lead prosecutor in the failed Estrada impeachment trial in 2000. He turned critical of the Arroyo Administration when the election fraud controversy involving President Arroyo erupted in July 2005. The "maverick" Senator -- who also criticized the Administration on major issues including the declaration of a state of emergency in February 2006, restraints on the media, and charter change -- decided nonetheless at the last minute to seek reelection under the pro-Administration ticket. Defending his decision, he explained that the Administration had never undermined his independence;

- Michael "Mike" Defensor, Lakas. Age 37, born June 30, 1969 in Manila. Defensor gave up his Quezon City seat in Congress first to become Environment Secretary, then housing czar, and finally Presidential Chief of Staff to President Arroyo. He is the nephew of current Senator Miriam Defensor Santiago, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Among the President's staunchest allies, he strongly defended her against opposition allegations of election fraud during the 2004 presidential elections. He was one of the complainants in the impeachment case against then-President Estrada but agreed to (unsuccessful) proposals for the latter's release on recognizance. He continues to reach out to the opposition and advocate national reconciliation. He ranked fourteenth or fifteenth in surveys for this race;

- Jamalul Kiram III, Partido Demokratiko Sosyalista ng Pilipinas (PDSP). Age 68, born July 16, 1938 in Sulu Province. One of the claimants to the Sultanate of Sulu in Mindanao, Kiram is the lone Muslim candidate in the race and was chosen for the perceived

influence he wields over the Islamic community. He bats for Mindanao development and Muslim representation in the Senate. The last Muslim Senator was Mrs. Santanina Rasul, who served in 1987-1995;

- Vicente "Vic" Magsaysay, Lakas. Age 67, born January 20, 1940 in Zambales. He served repeatedly as Governor of Zambales Province: 1998-2007; 1980-1986; 1978; 1971; and, 1967. Although lacking in national exposure, he has the advantage of name recall. Both his late uncle, President Ramon Magsaysay, and his cousin, outgoing Senator Ramon Magsaysay, Jr., were widely popular and highly respected politicians. He advocates strengthening local governments through more effective decentralization;

- Teresa "Tessie" Aquino-Oreta, NPC. Age 62, born June 28, 1944 in Manila. Sister of the martyred national hero Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, Jr. and sister-in-law of former President Corazon Aquino. Served as Senator, 1998-2004, and Congresswoman from Malabon-Navotas, 1987-1998. As a lawmaker, she pursued an agenda centered on education and the rights of women and children. Strongly identified with ousted President Estrada, she did not seek reelection in 2004 apparently fearful of the backlash of her unflinching loyalty to him. However, apparently smarting from the opposition camp favoring her nephew Benigno Aquino III, she joined the administration slate. The twelfth winning candidate in the 1998 Senate, she has not fared well so far in this year's surveys;

- Cesar "Buboy" Montano, Lakas. Age 44, born August 1, 1962 in Manila. The highly popular movie actor-director-producer (with a starring role in Miramax's "The Great Raid" in 2005) plunged into politics aiming at no less than a Senate seat. (Note: There are already three movie actors in the Senate: Jinggoy Estrada, Ramon "Bong" Revilla, and Manuel "Lito" Lapid. End note) Actress-wife Sunshine Cruz is in the thick of the campaign with him; both are capitalizing on their showbiz popularity to win votes. So far they are not succeeding; he is at the tail-end of surveys. He seeks to revive the ailing movie industry as well as to promote education, health, and tourism. He is currently a Philippine Commissioner for Culture and the Arts to UNESCO;

- Prospero "Butch" Pichay, Lakas. Age 56, born June 20, 1950 in Surigao del Sur Province. A print media publisher and radio station owner, he served three full terms in Congress from 1998 through 2007, most recently as Majority Leader. A loyal political lieutenant of President Arroyo, he defended her against impeachment moves in Congress. He was among the then-opposition Congressmen who endorsed the impeachment complaint against Estrada in 2000. A

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survey conducted by private firm Nielsen Media Research Philippines placed him on top in terms of campaign spending for pouring P33 million in television advertisements in the first two weeks of this senatorial campaign. However, he is at the bottom of the second 12 in current surveys;

- Ralph Recto, incumbent Senator, Nacionalista Party (NP). Age 43, born January 11, 1964 in Quezon City. He is married to popular movie actress and Lipa City Mayor Vilma Santos, who is the Administration's gubernatorial candidate in Batangas Province (barely edging out her brother-in-law). After serving three terms (1992-2001) as the same province's representative in Congress, Recto placed twelfth in the 2001 Senate race under the Administration slate. As Senator, he defended the passage of the unpopular Expanded VAT law to generate additional government revenues to reduce the budget deficit and to fund basic services, an issue that the opposition now raises against him. He voted in favor of Anti-Money Laundering Act and the Human Security Act. While in the lower house, he endorsed the impeachment complaint against Estrada. He continues to advocate for economic reform and countryside development. So far the third highest (P22.7 million) campaign advertisement spender, he has occupied the middle position of the top 12 in surveys;

- Vicente "Tito" Sotto III, NPC. Age 58, born August 24, 1948 in Manila. A highly popular television host and comedian, he topped the 1992 senatorial race and ranked third during his 1998 reelection

bid. As Senator, he voted in favor of the Visiting Forces Agreement and the Anti-Money Laundering Act, and actively pursued anti-illegal drug legislation. A staunch ally of his showbiz colleague Estrada, Sotto was among those who successfully convinced popular movie actor Fernando Poe Jr. to run in the May 2004 presidential race. Like Aquino-Oreta, he nonetheless joined the Administration slate after being ditched by the opposition. However, regardless of which side he takes, Sotto holds a track record of win-ability;

- Luis "Chavit" Singson, Lakas. Age 65, born June 21, 1941 in Ilocos Sur. His role as Estrada whistleblower -- which eventually led to the President's ouster and detention for plunder charges -- instantly brought Singson national fame. A long-time politician, he has served as Ilocos governor for over 25 years (off and on) and also represented the province in Congress in 1987-1992. His campaign took off late due to a medical condition. He has had a hard time shaking off his "tradpol" (traditional politician) image and the Estrada camp's tirades against him. Somewhat inexplicably, he played a prominent role in the resolution of a highly publicized hostage-taking of schoolchildren in Manila in March 2007, leading to allegations that he had staged the bizarre episode for political gain. He champions agriculture and farmers' welfare as well as strong local governments. However, he has so far performed poorly in surveys;

- Juan Miguel "Migs" Zubiri, Lakas. Age 37, born April 13, 1969 in Makati City. The young Zubiri belongs to the political elite but his environmental, agricultural, and biofuel advocacies have helped him to develop a broader constituency. Representing Bukidnon Province for three terms (1998-2007), he also supported economic reform legislation, endorsed the impeachment complaint against Estrada, and voted to junk the impeachment complaints against President Arroyo in 2005 and 2006. He has expressed optimism that party machinery and a ctchy campaign ad portraying him as the people's "migo" will up his survey rating, currently at the seventeenth notch.

Grand Alliance of the Genuine Oppostion

18. (SBU) The Genuine Opposition slate is the compomise handiwork of the fractious opposition, whih nonetheless agreed to consolidate forces to prserve an opposition-dominated Senate and continue he fight against the Arroyo administration. Obsrvers see the Estrada camp's effort to flex its rmaining political muscle and note that some canddates have quietly condoned past attempts to overthrow the Arroyo government, while others played a active role in the ouster of Estrada himself. lthough lacking in organization and apparently deendent on Estrada's declining financial resources,the opposition "powerhouse" slate stands a good hance of bagging more seats than the administraton slate. Composed of two Senate incumbents, thre former Senators, three term-limited Congressmen,three neophytes, and "guest candidates," the oppsition line-up is as follows:

- Benigno "Noynoy Aquino III, LP. Age 47, born February 8, 190 in Manila. Son of the late Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, Jr. and former President Corazon Aquino, he has vowed to continue his parents' fight for democracy, minus his father's fiery eloquence and his mother's influential moral leadership. He initially had a very

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popular campaigner in his youngest sister, popular television host and movie actress Kris Aquino, until well-publicized marital and pregnancy woes recently took her off the campaign trail. He represented Tarlac Province in Congress from 1998 through 2007, and was Deputy Speaker until he supported opposition calls for President Arroyo to resign, even endorsing the impeachment complaint against her. He had earlier supported the impeachment move against Estrada in 2000;

- Alan Peter "Companero" Cayetano, NP. Age 36, born October 28, 1970. He has acquired high media mileage with his systematic attacks against both President Arroyo and even more so First Gentleman Mike Arroyo. His latest accusation that the First Family kept multi-million dollar accounts in a German bank led the House Ethics Committee to investigate and recommend his suspension from

office for 45 days for failing to substantiate his claim. However, Congress adjourned before the recommendation could take effect. Cayetano's senatorial bid has received some criticism since his older sister Pia is already serving in the Senate (as did their late father Rene). There are moves as well to disqualify him due to alleged U.S. citizenship (his mother was an American and he reportedly at one time held a U.S. passport). He is on his third and final term as Taguig-Pateros Congressman; he has pursued health and education reform legislation. He endorsed impeachment complaints against Estrada in 2000 as well as against President Arroyo in both 2005 and 2006. He has performed well so far in surveys and could very well land in the second six of the top 12;

- Anna Dominique "Nikki" Coseteng, Independent. Age 54, born December 18, 1952 in Manila. She served as Senator 1992-2001 and as Congresswoman from Quezon City 1987-1992. As a lawmaker, she focused on legislation to protect women's rights. She opposed extension of U.S. bases but voted in favor of the Visiting Forces Agreement. Identified with the Estrada camp, she defended him during the failed impeachment trial. She is at the tail-end of surveys;

- Joseph Francis "Chiz" Escudero, NPC. Age 37, born October 10, 1969 in Manila. Graduate of Georgetown University. He represented Sorsogon Province in Congress from 1998-2007, and most recently served as Minority Leader. A brilliant and eloquent lawyer, Escudero reportedly dreams of becoming President someday and likely believes that landing a Senate seat is a step in that direction. He gained media mileage for leading failed opposition attempts in the House to impeach President Arroyo twice. He consistently performs well in poll surveys, often landing in the top six. His campaign platform includes housing, livelihood, education, health, human rights, and the environment;

- Panfilo "Ping" Lacson, incumbent Senator, United Opposition (UNO). Age 57, born June 1, 1948 in Cavite Province. A member of Philippine Military Academy's Class of 1971, he was Philippine National Police chief under Estrada. Ranking 10th in the 2001 Senate race, he launched a failed presidential bid halfway into his term in 2004, effectively splitting opposition votes. He voted in favor of the Anti-Money Laundering Act. One of the proponents of an anti-terror bill in the Senate, he expressed disappointment over a "mangled and watered down" Human Security Act that Congress passed in 2007. He is in the top six of the surveys. His campaign slogan "HOPE" stands for health, order, peace, and education;

- Loren Legarda, NPC. Age 47, born January 28, 1960 in Manila. Popular television personality turned politician, she is a former U.S. Embassy Ninoy Aquino Fellow for Journalism. Legarda topped the 1998 Senate race and was Majority Leader from 2001-2004. Although she actively stood against Estrada during the failed impeachment trial, she aligned with his camp and became the running mate of opposition bet Fernando Poe, Jr. Her ongoing formal election protest against proclaimed Vice Presidential winner Noli de Castro apparently ended when she filed her candidacy for the 2007 senatorial race. As a lawmaker, she voted for the Anti-Trafficking of Persons Act and the Anti-Money Laundering Act. She stood against the Retail Trade Liberalization Act and the Visiting Forces Agreement. The highly confident Legarda -- who champions the rights of women and children as well as environment protection -- consistently tops poll surveys again this year;

- John "Sonny" Osmena, UNO. Age 72, born January 17, 1935. After collaborating with the Administration during his unsuccessful 2004 re-election bid, he joined the Estrada camp apparently hoping to make a successful comeback. Part of the prominent but internally feuding Osmena clan of Cebu, he is clearly banking on the Visayas vote. He entices voters with a promise to push for free text messaging and the abolition of the EVAT law. As a lawmaker, he voted in favor of the Visiting Forces Agreement and the extension of U.S. bases. He is an advocate of federalism and has also projected

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himself as an anti-corruption advocate. He ranked eighth in the 1998 Senate elections and has retained a similar ranking in current

poll surveys;

- Aquilino "Koko" Pimentel III, PDP-Laban. Age 43, born January 20, 1964 in Cagayan de Oro City. This is his second attempt at politics, having lost his mayoral bid in Cagayan de Oro City in 2004. Like Cayetano, he is also facing political dynasty issues, since his father, Minority Leader Aquilino "Nene" Pimentel, Jr., is an incumbent Senator. A brilliant young lawyer, he pursued private practice after topping the 1990 Philippine Bar examinations. He was Commissioner for Mindanao in the National Youth Commission, 1995-1998;

- Sonia Roco, Aksyon Demokratiko (AD) or Democratic Action. Age 62, born July 20, 1944. An educator by profession, she co-founded the Center for Early Childhood Education at the Ateneo de Manila University's Psychology Department and established the Live and Learn PreSchool in Loyola Heights, Quezon City. She presents herself in the campaign trail as "Inang Guro" -- mother-educator -- and vowed to continue the educational reforms started by her late husband, former Education Secretary and Senator Raul Roco, who ran and lost in the 2004 presidential elections. She has also been active in NGO work for women, children, and the disabled;

- Antonio "Magdalo" Trillanes IV, UNO. Age 35, born August 6, 1971 in Manila. The youngest candidate in the opposition line-up, Trillanes is a junior military officer belonging to the Philippine Military Academy's Class of 1995. His ticket to fame was leading the Oakwood mutiny in July 2003, for which he has been under military detention for four years now on coup d'etat charges. He apparently eyes the Senate as the new venue for his reform advocacy, but his candidacy is hampered by inability of travel while in detention and a lack of media access. He apparently is banking on "Magdalo" - a small organization of young military reformists who launched the mutiny - as well as the internet to reach the voters.

Independent Candidates

19. (SBU) There are four independent candidates who either want to run without the political baggage of either camp or who failed to win inclusion. These are:

- Manuel Villar, Jr., incumbent Senator and current Senate President, NP. Age 57, born December 13, 1949 in Manila. Although running as an independent, Villar has agreed to be a "guest candidate" of the Genuine Opposition. He will need the support of ousted President Estrada -- over whose impeachment he presided as then-House Speaker -- to maintain this leadership position as well as to prepare for his expected 2010 presidential plans. A real estate developer, he is the current richest Senator, while his wife Cynthia holds the same distinction in the lower House. The second highest media campaign spender so far, he has spent some P30.29 million in the first two weeks of the senatorial campaign. A role model for entrepreneurship, he also advocates for environment protection and women's rights. As Senator, he voted for the Anti-Money Laundering Act and pushed for the passage of the Human Security Act. He placed seventh in the 2001 Senate elections and is presently in the top 6 of surveys;

- Francis "Kiko" Pangilinan, incumbent Senator and Majority Leader, LP. Age 43, born August 24, 1963 in Manila. Having supported calls for the resignation of Estrada in 2001 and Arroyo in 2005, Pangilinan said he rejected the offer to be the second "guest candidate" of the Genuine Opposition and to run independent as a matter of principle. He is married to a very effective campaigner, popular movie actress and product endorser Sharon Cuneta. He placed eighth in the 2001 Senate race and is currently in the top three of the surveys. As Senator, he pushed the passage of the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act and as well as other human rights and judiciary reform legislation;

- Gregorio "Gringo" Honasan, Independent. Age 59, born March 14, 1948 in Baguio City. A member of the Philippine Military Academy's Class of 1971, he is facing new coup d'etat charges for allegedly masterminding the failed Oakwood mutiny in July 2003 as well as alleged involvement in the attempted coup in February 2006. Honasan was arrested for a number of coup attempts against the Aquino

government but was granted amnesty by President Ramos, his co-player in the EDSA I people power revolution. Like fellow candidate Trillanes, he again is presently detained and unable to directly wage a national campaign, having been denied bail. But unlike Trillanes, Honasan is doing well in this year's surveys. He hopes to retake his Senate seat after having faced term limitations in 2004, and to continue his advocacy for police and military reform.

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Placing thirteenth in the 2001 elections, he served the unexpired portion of the six-year term of Teofisto Guingona, whom President Arroyo appointed as Vice President in 2001;

- Richard "Goma" Gomez, Independent. Age 40, born April 7, 1966 in Manila. A popular movie actor and television host now seeking to join the political bandwagon, Gomez is also active in the anti-drug movement. The Commission on Elections disqualified his organization, "Mamamayan Ayaw sa Droga (MAD)" or Citizens Against Drugs, as a party-list organization this year for having receiving funds from the government. Like fellow actor Montano on the Administration ticket, he is so far still in the losing bracket of surveys.

Other Alternatives

¶10. (SBU) A trio from "Ang Kapatiran" (Brotherhood) -- a political organization pursuing "God-centered politics" -- claim to offer a fresh alternative to "tradpols." Without political machinery or clout, much less name recall, medical doctor Mario Bautista, former Visiting Forces Agreement Commission Executive Director Zosimo Jesus Paredes - who lost his job after publicly opposing the December 2006 transfer of Lance Corporal Daniel Smith from Philippine custody back to U.S. custody - and lawyer Adrian Sison are facing an uphill battle. They are at the tail end of virtually all poll surveys.

Latest Poll Surveys Show Opposition Head Start

¶11. (U) The Social Weather Station and Pulse Asia -- two of the more credible survey outfits -- have run parallel surveys on the Senate race. Both show 17-18 candidates with statistical chances of winning. The latest SWS survey, conducted March 1-18, showed seven from the Genuine Opposition, five from TEAM Unity, and three independent candidates in the top fifteen. Topping the list is Legarda (GO), followed by independent incumbents Villar in second place and Pangilinan in third. Opposition bets Lacson, Escudero, and Cayetano occupy the fourth, fifth, and sixth places, respectively. In seventh and eighth places are Administration bets Recto and Angara; independent candidate Honasan is ninth. Arroyo (TU) and Aquino (GO) share the tenth and eleventh spots, while Sotto (TU) and Osmena (GO) are in twelfth and thirteenth places. Pimentel (GO) and Defensor (TU) are fourteenth and fifteenth. Roco (GO) and Zubiri (TU) follow as sixteenth and seventeenth, respectively.

¶12. (U) Pulse Asia's March survey also showed Legarda leading the pack, followed by Lacson, Pangilinan, Escudero, Recto, Villar, Arroyo, Aquino, and Angara. Pulse Asia predicted that Cayetano could bag anywhere between the fifth to eleventh number of votes, followed by Honasan, Sotto, Pimentel, Magsaysay, Roco, Osmena and Defensor. This would indicate that nine GO candidates, six TU candidates, and three independent candidates have statistical chances of winning.

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